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ABSTRACT

One of the constants of professional life for social workers is the need to write. For this reason, the social work instructor needs to emphasize the development of students' writing skills. Such skills cannot be left to composition courses alone, nor can it be assumed that students will emerge from degree programs with sufficient writing ability. La Salle University (Philadelphia) initiated a writing-across-the-curriculum project, in which six instructors, including one from the social work program, met with a composition specialist from the faculty to review writing assignments in light of new theories on the use of writing in college courses. The project combined five one-day summer workshops, periodic group meetings and one-to-one collaboration with the writing specialist throughout the academic year. The impact of the program was evaluated through both teacher and student commentary. As a result of her participation in the project, the social work instructor made a number of changes in the way she assigned writing in the social welfare policy course. In general, the quality of student writing in her course improved discernibly, and students learned how to use writing to record and refine their thinking. Class discussion revealed the value of using writing to link theoretical material with field observations. The results of this pilot writing project suggest that students' writing improves when instructors plan in a systematic fashion the design, sequencing, and implementation of writing assignments. (HTH)

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Writing in the Social Work Curriculum: Whose Responsibility?

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Abstract

The authors argue that the improvement of writing skills of social work students is the responsibility of undergraduate and graduate social work educators, and can best be accomplished by offering students opportunities for frequent writing, constructing writing assignments related to course objectives, explicit presentation of assignments, appropriate assignment-related instructions and clear evaluation procedures. The authors argue further that developing a pedagogy which includes these components can be most effectively achieved by collaborating with a writing specialist. The article presents a case description of the implementation of new approaches to assigning writing in several social work classes at La Salle University, Philadelphia.

Writing in the Social Work Curriculum: Whose Responsibility?

One of the constants of professional life for social workers is the omnipresent need to write. The practitioner is called upon regularly to complete records, internal and external reports, grant applications, and planning documents. Accountability to clients, constituents, supervisors, funding sources and the public hinges as much on clear and forceful prose as on accurate and orderly statistics.

For this reason the social work instructor needs to emphasize the development of social worker's writing skills. Such skills cannot be left to composition courses alone, nor can it be assumed that students emerge from B.A., B.S.W., or M.S.W. programs with sufficient writing facility. Recent research on the development of writing skills suggests that writing fluency is acquired only after a long period of time, even when opportunities for guided practice are present.[1] Therefore, both M.S.W. and B.S.W. educators must address the challenge of ensuring in a systematic way that their graduates are fluent and competent writers.

A review of the past five years of social work journals reveals an absence of published commentary by social work educators on the subject of social work students' writing, or writing assignments in social work courses.[2] This article is an attempt to initiate discussion about both.

Just as we have learned that the acquisition of social work statistical and computer skills cannot be acquired unsystematically,

we also cannot rely on students learning to write without ongoing reinforcement. They can and should begin receiving preparation to write professionally even in introductory courses, followed by continuous integration of specially designed writing assignments in intermediary and advanced courses. It is true that in many undergraduate and graduate social work programs it has been customary to assign large amounts of writing. However, for this assigned writing to be most effective it should draw upon recent theories on assignment design and evaluation developed during the last ten years.[3]

The Writing Across the Curriculum Project

National attention to the "writing crisis" has inspired composition specialists who typically teach in English Departments to develop a pedagogy that can help teachers in other disciplines and professions to use writing effectively in their undergraduate and graduate classes. New teaching ideas are being disseminated through what are called "Writing Across the Curriculum" programs. Writing across the curriculum theory proposes that the non-composition instructor can help students become good writers not only by teaching them the conventions of professional documents, or by correcting grammar, but perhaps more importantly, by encouraging them to develop the understandings and behaviors of all good writers, namely the use of writing as a tool for thinking, the awareness of writing as a process, and the importance of a concern for purpose and audience when writing. In these workshops teachers from both graduate and undergraduate faculties participate in work-

shops typically conducted by composition specialists. These workshops emphasize the importance of relating assignments to course objectives, clear presentation of assignment instructions, stipulating a purpose and audience for writing, using class time to present assignments, sequencing and staging student writing, and offering students explicit criteria for evaluating their writing. They offer a range of methods for implementing these suggested approaches.[4]

Writing to Enhance Learning

Writing Across the Curriculum programs are based on the assumption that writing is a powerful learning tool as well as an essential communication skill. Studies have indicated that writing enhances memory, aids reading comprehension, stimulates invention, deepens the capacity to form relationships between ideas, and sharpens critical thinking. Furthermore, because writing is integrative, involving cognitive, affective, and behavioral faculties, it is an active and creative learning mode. Neither speaking, reading or listening is as many a faceted activity as writing. These features suggest that all teachers should view the purpose of writing as two-fold: a means to communicate facts and ideas and also an instrument for making meaning.[5]

A Pilot Writing Across the Curriculum Project

La Salle University initiated a writing across the curriculum project in 1982. The project combined five one-day summer workshops, periodic group meetings and one-to-one collaboration with a writing specialist throughout the academic year. The

workshops provided opportunity for discussion of relevant theory on the relationships between writing and learning and a repertoire of methods for applying these theories in individual courses. In the first year of the project, six instructors, representing six different disciplines, including a faculty member from the B.S.W. program, met with a composition specialist from the English Department to review writing assignments in the light of new theories on the use of writing in undergraduate and graduate courses. Subsequent one-to-one sessions between individual instructors and the composition specialist were designed to further refine and individualize approaches of assignment construction and implementation in relation to the objectives and content of the respective disciplines. The impact of this year-long process was evaluated through both teacher and student commentary. All participants submitted a written summary and evaluation of their work in the project. Several used a formal student survey and others asked students to comment on writing assignments on the standard course evaluation form.

Modifying Writing Assignments

As a result of her participation in the project the B.S.W. instructor made a number of changes in the way she assigned writing in a social welfare policy course. She implemented these changes by developing one new assignment, reconstructing two existing assignments, and modifying her methods of presenting assignments and evaluating student papers.

The new writing assignment grew out of a perceived need to

bring into closer connection formal writing assignments and course objectives. One of the major objectives of the social welfare policy course is to assist students in applying theories of the social sciences to their role as advocate in a social welfare context. In light of that objective, the instructor adapted a journal assignment recommended by the composition teacher.

Journals, an informal kind of writing which emphasizes content rather than form, are especially appropriate for students who have field placements. Students in the author's social policy course were asked to participate in an advocacy project, of their own choosing, related to their field placement. They used the journal to record their activities and observations and to describe their intellectual, emotional, and ethical responses to the experience. They also noted social science theories and concepts relevant to their advocacy issue and project, resulting in a three-part journal entry for each day they participated in their advocacy work. (See Fig. 1)

The instructor read them twice during the semester and responded with questions and suggestions concerning practice, at times suggesting related readings. Journals did not receive a letter grade but were evaluated as adequate or inadequate. Since the journal was intended to encourage and document personal and professional development and profiency, it was felt that letter grades might inhibit students from honestly expressing the doubts and questions they had about their own performance.

Two former assignments (an annotated bibliography of social

welfare policy readings and an essay comparing historical sources) were judged appropriate for course objectives, and were modified to elicit better student papers, as well as to reduce students' apprehensions about completing the assignments. Several suggestions from the composition teacher were included in the changes. The annotated bibliography assignment was redesigned to include a set of written instructions which specified a purpose and audience for writing, the desired format of the bibliography, and an explanation of the descriptive and evaluative elements of annotation. A sample annotation as well as evaluation criteria were also included. (See Fig. 2) • In introducing the assignment an entire class session was devoted to clarifying the differences between summary and analysis. Criteria for selecting journal articles to annotate were also discussed. Formerly the assignment had been presented without this accompanying explanation and preparation. However, on the advice of the composition instructor, common student tendencies to confuse description and analysis and to choose journal articles haphazardly, were focused upon.

An assignment in the analysis of historical sources was reshaped in a similar way. (See Fig. 3) This assignment required students to compare the utility of primary and secondary sources for understanding issues and events in social welfare history. The two major objectives of the assignment were to expose students to the richness of original historical sources and to encourage them to consider a variety of sources before drawing conclusions. The stipulated audience for these essays was the first-term

freshman unfamiliar with history or historical research. The assignment required students to become familiar with major social science and historical indices.

In preparation for this assignment the nature of primary and secondary historical documents was examined in one class session. A second class session dealt with the respective utility of the different indices to journals. Both of these preparatory sessions in class were critical to the success of the project because students lack exposure to the conventions of historical inquiry.

Impact on Student Learning and Writing

In general the quality of student writing in this course improved discernibly, and students learned how to use writing to record and refine their thinking. The journal assignment seemed to sharpen students' capacity to observe and to relfect immediately upon those observations. Furthermore, students reported that regular journal writing made writing in general seem easier.

One student commented, "I hated the journal assignment at first. It made me do just what I dread most--write. By the third week of writing in the journal, I realized that I didn't have to force myself anymore. The dread was gone--in it's place was a desire--to express my thoughts clearly on paper."

Class discussion revealed the value of using writing to link theoretical material with field observations. The instructor observed that students in this class were more conversant than former classes had been with salient theoretical debates concerning social work advocacy, a central focus of this course.

Students who kept a journal seemed readily able to compare various theories of social advocacy. Whereas in past semesters the instructor had to prompt these comparisons, journal writing seemed to encourage students to make them independently.

Efforts to be more specific about requirements and guidelines for formal writing assignments as well as to provide related instruction in class had several benefits. The quality of writing in these classes improved. Organization and continuity of ideas were more obvious in student papers.

Student comments confirmed the value of the methods recommended by the composition specialist. One student wrote:

> In four years of college, I have gotten little help with organizing my writing. This course has given me lots of help with that and with understanding why writing is so central to the freeing up of my thinking. Particularly helpful to me are the one page sheets which detail the assignment including an audience and a basis on which I will be graded and a specific statement on the paper format expected.

Furthermore, student writing demonstrated a greater willingness to view material critically. Students were more apt to form negative evaluations of some published materials, not an easy task for students accustomed to accepting the printed word as truth.

Students moved beyond summary and description to analysis and evaluation. Many became aware of the need to identify their own criteria for evaluating the usefulness of published materials, an orientation that most previous students had not exhibited.

Unexpectedly, one of the consequences of more systematic structuring of assignments seemed to be greater student respect for paper deadlines. One might speculate that breaking down assignments

into discreet parts helped students to avoid procrastinating. An understanding of the tasks implied by the assignment made it possible for students to plan the production of the assignment more realistically. Additionally setting forth clear evaluation criteria in the initial assignment guidelines allowed students to exercise more control over the writing process. Because they understood the instructor's expectations from the beginning, students were more aware of the shortcomings of their first attempts. Although they were not required to do so, many students submitted drafts for review by the instructor prior to writing their final drafts.

Impact on Teaching

Relating writing assignments to course objectives helped the instructor give students powerful reasons for writing. When students understood the links between the writing assignments, course objectives, and vocational demands they seemed more apt to devote their best energies to the writing task. Often, poor writing stems from students' viewing writing assignments as exercises unrelated to professional development.

Analyzing the steps included in the formal writing assignments compelled the instructor to better understand the difficulties encountered by students in completing them. Instructors often underestimate the complexity of the tasks embedded in the assignments they design, because they can accomplish these tasks with ease. The instructor who conducted the course under discussion concluded that she should reduce the number of formal assignments, clarify the written instructions for those she retained, but not

dilute the cognitive demands of each assignment. The instructor also decided that journal writing, a more informal kind of writing, can fulfill some course objectives more effectively than formal assignments.

Implications for Social Work Educators

The results of this pilot writing project suggest that student writing improves when faculty plan in a systematic fashion the design, sequencing, and implementation of writing assignments. The presentation of explicit descriptions of instructions and evaluation criteria seems to help students understand the scope and tasks included in assignments. However, it is the nature of the assignments and methods of presenting them that seem to help students develop capacities that they can use in future writing as well as in future social work practice. Journals help them learn to use writing as a thinking tool, and specifying purpose and audience for writing encourages them to be concerned about the social context of messages. Staging writing assignments and pre-assignment instruction simulates the phases of thinking and writing about a subject. Furthermore, the focus on summary, analysis, evaluation and documentation reinforces abilities tested in the daily context of the social work profession.

Conclusion

Though instructors can evaluate the efficacy of their own writing assignments independently, the process of redesigning writing tasks is eased when done collectively. Changing long-established teaching practices is not easy even when teachers

perceive the need. A group effort that includes a colleague specifically trained in teaching composition provides a range of new alternative teaching methods that individual instructors may adopt. Furthermore, it is useful, while experimenting with new teaching methods, to receive immediate feedback.

The La Salle University experiment in writing across the curriculum seems to suggest that improvements in student writing can be achieved in a relatively short time. Despite considerable evidence of writing deficiencies among social work practitioners and students, instructors of social work should not be totally discouraged. If instructors in both M.S.W. and B.S.W. programs focus collectively on a curricular innovation that encourages good writing, we can expect gradual progress in developing the writing skills of future social workers. Particularly in this time of retrenchment in social service resources, the necessity for preparing social work professionals who are able to voice the priorities and direction of the profession has never been greater.

Figure 1

Social Welfare Policy 1

Advocacy Project Log

I. Purpose

A. To encourage students to record systematically their advocacy project activities, observations, reflections and responses: cognitive, emotional, and ethical.

B. To encourage students to integrate theories and concepts to which they are exposed in classes with the advocacy experience they engage in.

II. Content and Format

Your log entries will have three essential parts:

Date	Brief Narratives	Reflections and Responses	Relevant Theories and Concepts
	Summary of your participation	Your thoughts, feelings, and ethical responses to or comments on what you are seeing and doing e.g. Do you find this group's approach a reasonable one? Is there anything contradictory in the approach used?	Whenever possible, note concepts or theories you have read and/or discussed which are relevant to your work or observations e.g. concepts from organizational theory, stratification theory, personality theory, economic theory.

III. Audience

1. Your present and future professional self. This log is an opportunity to document your own evolution, observations, and application of theory to practice.

2. The instructor: This log is written primarily for yourself. Nonetheless I will also read it to gain an understanding of the depth, breadth, and nature of your involvement in and grasp of the advocacy process.

IV. Evaluation Criteria (YOUR WRITING MAY BE INFORMAL, THOUGH IT MUST BE INTELLIGIBLE.)

Figure 1 - contd.

1. How complete and detailed are your narratives?

2. Do your responses and reflections indicate a serious effort to respond from a variety of perspectives: cognitive, emotional and ethical?

3. How able are you to find interconnections between theory and practice?

Social Welfare Policy 1

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

An annotated bibliography is a summary and critique of a thematic selection of books and journal articles.

I. Purpose

A. To assist students in developing the ability to extract and abstract the essential points of an argument, discussion or presentation.

B. To encourage students to analyze critically materials they read, hear, or encounter.

II. Content

For each of the four or more articles or books you read on the subject of your advocacy work, write:

a. A summary - a brief description of the essential points made, of the scope of the discussion, and the point of view of the author.

b. A critique - your reflections on the significance, strengths, and weaknesses of the article or book.

III. Format

Annotate a minimum of four journal articles or books. List them using standard bibliographic form, with the summary and critique of each entry immediately following each citation. Each annotation should range from 4-10 sentences long.

Use the following model entry as an example:

Figure 2-contd.

Titmuss, Richard M. Social Policy: An Introduction. London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1974.

Titmuss creates order out of the chaos of policy studies by presenting three fundamental models of social policy that have been enacted historically and contemporarily. These include: 1) the residual welfare model, which addresses with temporary services and means tests, only needs unmet by the private market or family; 2) the industrial achievement model, which measures personal and social work in terms of work productivity and performance; and 3) the institutional redistributive model, which Titmuss advocates, which provides universalist services outside the private market on the basis of human need.

The book is particularly rich in case study examples of the principles under discussion. Titmuss' international perspective and data, though sometimes articulated in terms too difficult for the reader unfamiliar with social policy, enables the reader to make cross-cultural comparisons of social welfare philosophies, institutions, and practices.

IV. Audience

La Salle University students who will take this course in the near future.

V. Evaluation Criteria

1. Are your summaries sufficiently detailed to be comprehensive and representative of the work which is annotated?

2. Do your critiques address the authors' logic, methods, and effectiveness in carrying out his/her stated purpose?

3. Are your grammar, punctuation, and spelling correct?

4. Have you followed standard bibliographic form?

Figure 3

Social Welfare Policy I

Analysis of Historical Sources

I. Purpose

1. To assist you in your understanding of the strengths, limitations, and comparative uses of sources of historical information.

2. To encourage you in developing a critical approach to all printed material.

II. Content

Choose a primary document (an original source recorded by a participant or first-hand observer of the event or phenomenon under discussion) from those presented by Axinn and Levin. Then read a journal article (secondary source) about the same subject. (To find citations of journal articles on your historical topic, use the following indices.)

Humanities Index

Social Work Research and Abstracts

If you are using a larger library than La Salle University's, see also:

America: History and Life

Social Sciences Citation Index

Arts and Humanities Citations Index

Then analyze the strengths and limitations of these two kinds of sources. Discuss and compare the particular uses of both sources to a twentieth-century person attempting to understand your

Figure 3 - continued

topic.

Audience

Address your paper to a first-term freshman at college who has never before done research on a historical topic.

Form: 4-6 pages, double-spaced. Please use footnote and bibliographic form found in the Modern Language Association Handbook. Be sure to include an introduction and conclusion. Also include footnotes and a bibliography. This paper is due on Wednesday, October 13th in class.

Grading Criteria: I will examine to what degree the paper is:

a) clear
b) coherent
c) cogent (compelling)
d) thoughtful (full of your own thoughts)
e) grammatically correct
f) well-documented with footnoted examples from both types of sources.

Endnotes

1 James Britton, et. al., The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18) (London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1975)

2 The authors examined 1979-84 volumes of the Journal of Education for Social Work, Social Work, Social Work Research and Abstracts and the Social Sciences Citation Index. No articles or references to articles on writing in social work programs were cited though listings for articles on writing in the social sciences were multiple in the Social Sciences Citation Index.

3 Richard Beach. New Directions in Composition Research (New York: Guilford Press, 1984.

4 Toby Fulwiler and Robert Jones, "Faculty Workshops in Writing." Freshman English News, 8 (Fall, 1979), pp. 3-4. Toby Fulwiler, "Showing, Not Telling at a Writing Workshop. College English, 43 (Jan., 1981), pp.55-63.

5 Emig, Janet. "Writing as a Mode of Learning," College Composition and Communication, 28 (May, 1977), 122-128.